

Altoona City Hall  
12th Street and 13th Avenue  
Intown Neighborhood  
Altoona  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5520

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ALTOONA CITY HALL  
HABS No. PA-5520

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- Location: Northwest corner of 12th Street and 13th Avenue, Altoona, Blair County, Pa.
- Present Owner: City of Altoona.
- Present Use: The multi-functional building houses city administrative offices, council chambers, and Altoona's police department and prison.
- Significance: For a brief period, from 1918 to 1921, Altoona adopted a city manager form of government, which accomplished a great deal in a short time. In addition to upgrading the public parks system and initiating new highways projects, the city manager also streamlined municipal government, establishing a more efficient and equitable system for collecting taxes. Although construction of the proposed municipal building did not take place under the brief reform administration, the Beaux Arts-style city hall of 1925-27, a design by Frederic Shollar and Frank Hersch of Altoona, nonetheless stands as symbol of the reformers' aspirations and the city's progress in the hoom decade of the 1920s.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1925-27. Ground was broken June 22, 1925, and the cornerstone was laid without ceremony November 20, 1925. The building officially opened on Armistice Day-- November 11, 1927.
2. Architect: The local architectural firm of Hersch and Shollar won an open competition for the design.

Frederic James Shollar (1873-1960) first joined with Frank A. Hersch (1874-1949) in 1900, opening offices in the Altoona Trust Building in 1902 or 1903. Their partnership eventually dissolved, for in 1917 Hersch and Hersch maintained offices in the Central Trust Building while Shollar remained in the Altoona Trust Building. By 1925 Shollar and Hersch were reunited. This partnership lasted until the 1930s, when the two men again separated. During their early years together, (ca. 1902-15) the firm was known as Shollar and Hersch; when the architects reunited (ca. 1925-30s), they reversed the names and were known as Hersch and Shollar. Despite the disjunctures in their long partnership, Shollar and Hersch were responsible for designing many of Altoona's most significant institutional and commercial buildings.

Both men were also active in the community. Shollar, a Socialist, ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania in 1914. He helped establish the City Planning Commission of Altoona and for six years served as it chairman. He was also a member of the chamber of commerce and the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.). Hersch was a member of the A.I.A., the Masons, and the Jaffa Temple. (Shollar obituary, Altoona Mirror [January 16, 1960]; Hersch obituary, Altoona Mirror [October 8, 1949]; and "Frederic James Shollar" in Davis, 127-28.)

3. Original and subsequent owners: On November 2, 1869, John Wright sold a corner lot measuring 75' x 120' to the Vigilant Fire Company for \$1,075. (Deed Book X/309)  
The City of Altoona purchased the site in 1872, establishing the offices of city government on the second floor of the Vigilant building. The volunteer fire department continued to operate independently until 1895, when the city took over its operation on a professional basis.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

Contractor: Columbia Construction Company, Inc., an Altoona firm with offices in the Altoona Trust Building, won the contract with a bid of \$246,914. In addition to building mercantile structures in Central Pennsylvania and elsewhere, Columbia Construction did considerable work for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Projects of note include the construction of railroad icing stations in Huntingdon, Pa., and Wilmington, N.C., as well as several towers and boiler houses. (Altoona Mirror [March 5, 1925].)

Excavation: E. L. Grannas, 1911 5th St.

Cut stone: McGinley Cut Stone, Union Avenue.

Brick: Altoona Brick Company, 1115 11th St.

Lumber: J. C. Orr and Sons, 5th Street and 7th Avenue.

Sand and Plaster: Blair Building Material Co., 1710 Margaret Ave.

Structural steel: Bethlehem Fabricating Co.

Roof: Union Roofing Co., 9th Avenue.

Painting: H. L. Wilson, Chestnut Avenue and 11th Street.

Hardware: W. I. Daugherty and Son, 1108 11th St.

Elevators: Otis Elevator of Harrisburg received \$12,640 for two elevators.

Heating System: Installed by Mulch Brothers of Hollidaysburg, Pa.

Plumbing fixtures: Supplied by Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Co., 916 11th Ave., and Standard Supply and Equipment Co.

Plumbing installation: F. S. Tierney, 809 7th St.

Electrical fixtures: Furnished by J. E. Spence, 1312 12th Ave. and Altoona Electrical Supply, 1120 11th Ave.

Furnishings: H. W. McCartney 1107 11th Ave., had a contract for filing cabinets, steel desks, and safes totalling \$18,072.80; William F. Gable Co. supplied 285 office chairs for \$5,217.25.

Cells: Van Doren Iron Works, Cleveland, Ohio, won a contract for \$16,347.

(Compiled from numerous articles in New City Hall clippings files, Altoona Mirror library.)

5. Original plans and construction: Altoona's new city hall incorporated several branches of municipal government under one roof, as had the old building. The new structure's plan, however, also reflected the progressive era's concerns with centrality, efficiency, and streamlined government. Shollar and Hersh located the offices of the mayor, city treasurer, and water department on the first floor to afford the public easy and direct access. The patrol room, located at ground level on the alley side, was equipped with a private elevator for discreetly transporting people to the third-floor holding cells. The second floor had the offices of the city engineer, assessor, and highways department. The third floor contained the courts, council chambers, police department, and a public auditorium.

On the exterior, entrances on both the street and avenue sides reinforced the ideal of government's accessibility to the people. A marquee suspended over the 13th Avenue entrance appears in early photographs and postcard views, but it is not clear whether this was original or a very early addition. The cost of the building was \$249,950.

6. Alterations and additions: While the exterior of the building remains virtually unaltered, one change is particularly worthy of note--the street facades have been altered by the application of green metal panels over the spandrels between the second and third floors; originally, these spandrels were fitted with dark metal panels with bas-relief designs and egg-and-dart molded borders. In addition, some of the first-floor windows have been filled with glass block within the last ten years. On the interior, most of the transom windows throughout the building have been blocked up, and drop ceilings have been installed. The original wicket surrounding the treasurer's

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office has been replaced with more contemporary office furniture.

B. Historical Context:

The first building on this site was erected for the Vigilant Steam Fire Engine Company in 1870, two years after Altoona was chartered as a city. Funds for construction were raised through private subscriptions and contributions from members of the company. Benjamin F. Rose, president of Vigilant, is credited with designing the structure; D. K. Ramey supplied the lumber; John Robinson laid the brick; and Joseph Watson cut the foundation stone.<sup>1</sup> The engine house's 75' corner tower, which served as a hose lookout, was a landmark on the late nineteenth-century skyline. When the building was razed in 1925 to make way for the city hall, the old clock, a post-1870s addition, and the bell, which for years sounded the general fire alarm, were donated to the Blair County Historical Society, where they remain today.

The three-story, brick engine house evolved over the years into the city's first all-purpose municipal building. Although Altoona's founding mayor and council were elected in 1868, there were apparently no immediate plans to construct a building specifically to house the offices of local government. Finally, after a year of rigorous negotiations, city officials purchased the Vigilant Building in 1872, establishing the offices of city government on the second floor. The fire company continued to occupy a portion of the first floor until 1895, when the city took over the entire building.

Even with the space vacated by the volunteer fire department, Altoona's administrative offices remained overcrowded. It was not until the building was enlarged in 1897-98 at a cost of \$9,400 that the offices of the city treasurer, city clerk, and water department were located there. Previously these various offices had been scattered throughout the downtown area. Later additions enlarged the 12th Avenue side in 1908 and the western side in 1914.<sup>2</sup>

Construction of the new city hall commenced with a ground-breaking ceremony on June 22, 1925, and the building was occupied on November 11, 1927. The councilmen's plans underwent several modifications after Altoona's voters flatly rejected a \$1 million loan scheme to finance the construction; commissioner W. M. C. Craine countered with a successful proposal for a \$300,000 structure. Working within the established financial constraints, Shollar and Hersh designed Altoona's new city hall in the monumental, Beaux Arts style befitting a civic building of the progressive era. However, to cut expenses, they decided to continue incorporating the various municipal functions under one roof, in contrast with the nationwide trend toward more specialized structures for each branch of local government. To this day, the police department, jail, courts, city treasurer, and mayor share the building. Moreover, the consolidation and streamlining of city government in the 1920s did not necessarily eliminate the interdependent relationship that sometimes existed between the railroad and city. Older employees in the office of the city engineer remember a time when Conrail engineers would alternately take a year or two off from their own work to run the city engineer's office.<sup>3</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

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<sup>1</sup>"History of the City Hall in Altoona," [typescript of dedication speech], November 11, 1927, 2-4. Altoona Mirror library.

<sup>2</sup>"New City Hall Occupied November 11, 1927," 4, typescript, Altoona Mirror clippings file.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Kinscr, city engineer, interviews by Nancy Spiegel, June 28, 1989 and August 2, 1989, Altoona, Pa.

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1. Architectural character: The monumental, Beaux Arts-style exterior, which features symmetrical limestone and brick facades and a projecting central pavilion, was emphasized at the expense of the interior, which is rather plain.
2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The rectangular, three-story building measures 76' x 107' x 60' to the top of the parapet wall on the roof.
2. Foundations: Rockport gray granite.
3. Walls: The walls are clad with rusticated Indiana limestone at the first floor and buff brick laid in Flemish bond at the second and third stories. The central pavilion, which projects slightly, has four Doric columns in antis at the second and third stories. A terra cotta frieze above the columns reads "ALTOONA CITY HALL" in incised letters.
4. Structural systems, framing: Steel frame with interior walls of brick and gypsum block. The roof is framed with a steel-truss system.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main (12th Street) entrance has an elliptically arched doorway with a transom and sidelights. The original double doors have been replaced. The 13th Avenue entrance has a plain, rectangular doorway with a rectangular transom window above.
  - b. Windows: Two-part windows with double-hung sash and paired square transoms above on the street facades; these measure 6'-4" while the smaller windows on the north and west sides measure 4'-8".
6. Roof:
  - a. Shape: Rectangular, low-hipped roof.
  - b. Cornice: The molded terra cotta cornice is surmounted by a brick parapet wall containing a plaque which reads "ERECTED MCMXXV."

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
  - a. First: Two wide corridors--one leading from each of the two main entrances--intersect in the middle of the first floor. The offices of the city treasurer, water department, and mayor's office are here. The floor-to-ceiling height is 15'.
  - b. Second: A mezzanine section leading from the second-floor corridor houses the offices of the city electrician, and employees' lunchrooms. The floor-to-ceiling height is 13'-3".

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- c. Third: The courts, city council chambers, public auditorium, and police department are located here. The floor-to-ceiling height is 14'-5".
  - 2. Stairways: Located opposite the 12th Street entrance, the main staircase has a steel frame, wrought-iron balusters, and marble treads.
  - 3. Flooring: Tile throughout.
  - 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The entrance vestibule has marble baseboards. The public corridors on all three floors have marble baseboards, Caen stone finish on the walls, and cast-plaster cornices.
  - 5. Openings:
    - a. Doorways and doors: All of the doors are mahogany with architrave moldings; most have been painted black.
    - b. Skylights: The roof has seven skylights--two lighting the stairway and third floor landing, two lighting the council chambers, and three over the police department offices.
  - 6. Mechanical systems:
    - a. Heating: Steam.
    - b. Lighting: Electric.
- D. Site:
- 1. General setting and orientation: City hall stands in isolation, with streets to the south and east, and an alley on the north side. A parking lot for city vehicles is located to the west of the building.
  - 2. Outbuildings: A two-story, brick city hall annex is located across the alley, on the corner of 12th Street and 14th Avenue.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: The office of the city engineer has a complete set of original blueprint drawings (elevations, plans, sections, and details, etc.) minus the detail sheet showing the bas-relief spandrels. The sheets were drawn by Gerald Shollar, Frederic Shollar's son, and dated May 5, 1925.
- B. Early views:
  - 1. Altoona Charter Centennial, 1868-1968 (Altoona: Altoona Charter Committee, 1968), 62, photograph of the building before the bas-relief spandrels were either covered or removed.
  - 2. A proposed design that was never built is illustrated in "Frieling's Plan for City Hall," Altoona Mirror clippings file, date obscured [1924]. The design submitted by architect Walter Frieling of Altoona called for a three-story Beaux Arts-style building with paired, round-arched entrances on both the street and avenue sides. His proposal also eliminated approach steps, which could be difficult to ascend in the winter months.

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C. Interview: Michael Kinser, city engineer, interviews by Nancy Spiegel, June 28, 1989, and August 2, 1989, Altoona, Pa.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary sources: Important items from the Altoona Mirror library's New City Hall clippings file include:

"Bids are Open on New City Hall," (June 7, 1925).

"Columbia Co. to Build City Hall," (July 19, 1925).

"Lay Cornerstone of New City Hall," (November 20, 1925.)

"New City Hall is Looming Up," (December 11, 1926).

"New City Hall to be Fine Structure," (February 14, 1925).

"Seal to Ornament New City Hall," (August 12, 1925).

"Utility Keynote in New City Hall," (November 11, 1926).

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Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.

Insurance Maps of Altoona...Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1932.

2. Secondary sources:

"History of the City Hall in Altoona," [typescript of dedication speech], November 11, 1927.  
Altoona Mirror library.

Lebovich, William L. America's City Halls. Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1984.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the direction of Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach.